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October 25, 2010

TO:

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FROM:

Jonathan E. Fielding, M.D., M.P.H. In han Eheldy no Director and Health Officer

SUBJECT:

MARIJUANA USE IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

This is to provide additional information regarding marijuana use in Los Angeles County following my June 8, 2010 memo.

State and National Trends

Data indicate that rates of marijuana use in California are similar to those across the nation. According to a recent RAND study, in 2007, seven percent of individuals age 12 years and older reported marijuana use in the past 30 days compared to six percent nationwide. Data from 2002 through 2007 showed no increase in use among individuals 12 years and older. The lowest rates of recent use among those 12 years and older were reported in Los Angeles County, Santa Clara County, and central regions of the State (less than 6.5 percent).

Marijuana Use in Los Angeles County

Since there is no standard reporting system for substance use or local data on the prevalence of marijuana use, we have used a variety of data from four principal sources to develop a composite picture of marijuana use in Los Angeles County. These sources are: 1) national drug use survey estimates; 2) drug treatment admission data from publicly-funded treatment and recovery programs in Los Angeles County; 3) the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey²; and (4) emergency room visit, hospital admission and poison center data.

National Surveys on Drug Use and Health Estimates

Modeling techniques were applied to the National Surveys on Drug Use and Health data for the three-year period from 2004 to 2007³. The resulting drug use index figures, collected at the State and regional levels were available for Los Angeles County which comprises one of the 15 regional areas in California. This allowed for a comparison of drug use estimates at national, State and regional, (in this case Los Angeles County) levels.

For the 2004-2007 period, among persons age 12 years and older, the annual national marijuana use estimate was 10.5 percent. California had an annual use index of 11.6 percent and ranked 15th among the fifty states. Although some regions of California have among the highest use levels in the country⁴, Los Angeles County's drug use index was 10.3 percent, lower than both the State and national figures and ranking 159th among the 350 regions ranked nationwide. A corresponding estimate of monthly marijuana use revealed similarly lower rates in Los Angeles County when compared to the State and the nation. The monthly use index for Los Angeles County was 5.5 percent, compared to seven percent for the State and 6.1 percent for the nation.

Drug Treatment Admission Data

During fiscal year (FY) 2008-09 data indicate there were 17,846 admissions into publicly-funded Los Angeles County drug treatment programs in which marijuana was the main drug of choice⁵, comprising over one-third (37.3 percent) of all admissions that fiscal year. The data also reveal that marijuana users in these drug treatment programs tend to be younger than other substance users. In FY 2008-09, marijuana was reported as the main drug of choice for over 81 percent of clients 17 years of age and younger; 48 percent of clients 18 to 24 years of age; and only 27 percent of those 30-39 years of age.

Drug treatment admissions citing marijuana as a main drug of choice increased in the five years between FYs 2004-05 and 2008-09 from 32.1 to 37.0 percent. It is unclear from the available data if this increase represents a relative increase in access to treatment programs for marijuana users, increased recognition of need for treatment among marijuana users, or an actual increase in the number of marijuana users.

National Youth Risk and Behavior Survey

The second source of data regarding marijuana use comes from the national Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). The YRBS is conducted every two years and surveys youth in grades 9-12 in public and private schools nationwide.

YRBS data for Los Angeles County were examined for high school students during the five survey years beginning in 2001. The percentage of 9th through 12th graders reporting that they had ever used marijuana has dropped steadily from 35.3 percent in 2001 to 27.9 percent in 2008. Of those students reporting marijuana use in the last 30 days there was little change in use rates, from 22.5 percent in 2001 to 21.4 percent in 2007⁶.

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More recently, 2009 YRBS data indicate that there is no significant difference between high school students in Los Angeles County and those nationwide who report a history of marijuana use (37.6 percent) as well as those using marijuana in the past 30 days (19.3 percent). However, data indicate a significantly higher proportion of Los Angeles County high school students reported using marijuana on school premises in the past 30 days (7.7 percent) compared with high school students nationwide (4.6 percent).

Emergency Room Visit, Hospital Admission and Poison Center Data

Although it is difficult to tease out the actual number of emergency room visits and hospital admissions due to marijuana in the data (in both cases marijuana is categorized with other drugs, typically hallucinogens), data compared from 2005 through 2008 indicated a 146 percent increase in emergency room visits related to "hallucinogens" (from 32 in 2008 to 79 in 2008). In contrast the number of hospitalizations related to hallucinogens remained relatively stable during the same period (from 164 admissions in 2005 to 163 in 2008).

The California Poison Control System provides 24-hour emergency toll-free telephone advice for poison exposures throughout the State. Although no data is available at the county level during the eighteen months from January 2009 through June 2010, there were 65 marijuana-related calls to the four poison control centers. Of these 37 percent were reports regarding youth younger than 18 years of age.

Edible Marijuana Products

Concerns have been raised regarding edible marijuana products due to reported cases of unintentional ingestion among adults and children. Intoxication has been reported related to inadvertent ingestion of baked goods containing marijuana. A paper published in 1983 documented intoxication among children in Northern California. Its findings illustrate these concerns⁷. Three children ranging from ages two to four ingested cookies containing marijuana. Although all three recovered, their symptoms were sufficient to warrant medical attention. In 2009, in a Los Angeles County incident reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, five individuals inadvertently ingested brownies containing marijuana purchased from a street vendor⁸.

<u>Summary</u>

According to national data, marijuana use begins early among a small proportion of teens with increasing numbers of youth trying marijuana through the high school years. Data indicate that by the time they reach 12th grade, approximately 38 percent of Los Angles County youth had tried marijuana at least once. Approximately ten percent (9.6 percent) of these youth had tried marijuana before the age of 13 years. Recent marijuana use was reported by 19.3 percent of high school youth. Despite these levels of use among youth, less than seven percent of the Los Angeles County population 12 years of age and older report current marijuana use. Local data

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indicate that increasing numbers of marijuana users are enrolling in publicly funded drug treatment programs.

These data suggest acute and chronic problems associated with marijuana use are increasing. Currently there are insufficient data to determine whether the increase is due to demand for treatment or whether these trends relate to increased availability of marijuana through the medical marijuana dispensaries. Despite these unanswered questions, these findings raise sufficient concern to warrant continued monitoring of trends in marijuana use and related treatment services.

Please let me know if you have any questions or would like additional information.

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c: Chief Executive Office
County Counsel
Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors
Sheriff Department
Chief Probation Officer

¹ Altered State? Assessing How Marijuana Legalization in California Could Influence Marijuana Consumption and Public Budgets, by Beau Kilmer, Jonathan P. Caulkins, Rosalie Liccardo Pacula, Robert J. MacCoun, and Peter H. Reuter, OP -315-RC, 2010, available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP 315/.

² "The national Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) monitors priority health risk behaviors that contribute to the leading causes of death, disability, and social problems among youth and adults in the United States. The national YRBS is conducted every two years during the spring semester and provides data representative of 9th through 12th grade students in public and private schools throughout the United States.

³ Office of Applied Studies. (2008). Substate estimates from the 2004-2006 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

⁴ Region 1 in northern California (which includes Humboldt County) ranks 12th with an index use level of 15.7 percent.

⁵ Main drug of choice includes those indicating the specific drug as either a primary and secondary drug of choice.

⁶ Data on recent use was unavailable for 2008.

Weinberg, D Lande, A Hildon, and D Kerns, Intoxication from Accidental Marijuana Ingestion. Pediatrics Vol. 71 No. 5 May 1983, pp. 848-850

⁸ Inadvertent Ingestion of Marijuana Los Angeles, California, 2009. MMWR. 2009;58:947-950